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ABSTRACT

Faculty in higher education programs rely on individual advising sessions to counsel students in a variety of professional and personal endeavors, ranging from course selection, clinical internship, locations, resume preparation, and thesis or dissertation topics. This study examined the self-study activities conducted between 1994 and 1996 by the Higher Education Administration Program at the University of Alabama for the purpose of evaluating the quality of faculty advising. In an exploratory survey of graduate students seeking Master's and Doctoral degrees in the Higher Education Administration Program, respondents (N=56) rated their perceptions of the effectiveness of advising episodes and encounters within the episodes. The study found that Master's level students were generally satisfied with their advisor's availability for consultation and advising, and reported that they benefitted from their advisor in both scholastic and professional areas. They also reported that they felt inadequately prepared for their advising sessions and felt the need for more advising time. The doctoral students felt that their advisors had knowledge of requirements, assisted in career guidance, and were available at times other than registration. Students were not generally in favor of group advising activities. The study appeared to support and reinforce existing advising activities and efforts. (PRW)

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Advising Graduate Students in Higher Education Programs:

An Institutional Effort and Survey Instrument

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Abstract

Higher Education graduate programs have drawn similar student bodies during the past two or three decades, and although institutions have occasionally adopted a customer service attitude among business operations, few efforts have been undertaken to identify satisfaction in advising. The current case study provides an example of how the Higher Education Administration Program at The University of Alabama made an effort to assess academic and academic-related advising.

Graduate programs in higher education, whether focused on administrative skill enhancement, policy analysis, or preparation for scholarly positions, rely on the ability of faculty members to communicate both individually and with groups of students. Graduate students, often representing many of the characteristics of adult learners, provide complex case studies for faculty in determining how best to relate information and advice. Typically, faculty in higher education programs rely on individual advising sessions to counsel students in a variety of professional and personal endeavors, ranging from course selection, clinical internship locations, resume preparation, and thesis or dissertation topics.

The Higher Education Administration Program at The University of Alabama undertook a series of self-study activities between 1994 and 1996 in preparation for its Academic Program Review. Recognizing the need for quality advising, a survey of graduate students was completed. The survey, which was administered to students with their academic advising materials, was adapted from the pilot instrument utilized by the School of Education at the University of Arkansas-Monticello. The instrument provided opportunities for students to rate their perceived effectiveness of various advising episodes and encounters within the episodes. The survey was not intended to elicit cumulative responses, but rather, situational responses from advising which took place in the 1995 and 1996 academic years.

The purpose for the current manuscript was to provide an initial analysis of data which could be used in the Graduate School's Academic Program Review of the Higher Education Administration Program, as well as to provide additional pilot testing of the Arkansas-Monticello self-report instrument.

Background of the Study

Higher Education graduate programs vary based on institutional, regional, and occasionally national needs. These needs may be determined through research activity, or more commonly, through an institution's attempt to serve current professionals working various areas of higher education administration.

Grace and Fife (1986) reported that students enrolled in graduate Higher Education programs were typically in their mid-thirties, about half of them were female, most had an academic background in the liberal arts or humanities, had full-time collegiate work experience, and were split between general administrative concentrations and student personnel administration concentrations. To further add to the variety of expectations, Miller and Nelson (1993) noted a great diversity of what faculty considered to be basic or core reading materials for students in the discipline. In response to this type of diversity, Miller and Dirkx (1995) identified graduate student organizations related to the discipline of adult education. They found that adult education graduate students generally supported the concept of group advising and tended to desire more informal

interaction among their peers. This was observed to be consistent with the Higher Education Administration Program at The University of Alabama, where primarily part-time students comprised the student population.

The Alabama Higher Education Administration Case

Programs Offered

The Higher Education Administration Program offers two degree opportunities for students interested in the field of study:

1. Master of Arts: The Master of Arts degree in Higher Education Administration consists of either 30 credit hours or 36 credit hours of course work, depending on the area of concentration. The 30 credit hour program is designed for the current practitioner who pursues the degree on a part-time basis. Typically referred to as the "Organization and Administration of Higher Education" concentration, students are required to complete 18 credit hours of course work in Higher Education Administration, with four courses required of all students: Perspectives on Higher Education; The Law and Higher Education; Organization and Administration of Higher Education; and Finance and Business Affairs in Higher Education. Students are then allowed to select two electives from the remaining Higher Education Administration course work, and must select one course from both the offerings of Educational Research and Educational Foundations. These students are then left with six credit hours

of elective course work, choosing from any Graduate course work available at The University of Alabama.

The Master of Arts degree program also allows for concentration in either College Student Affairs Administration or College Sports Administration. Both options require 36 credit hours of course work, including the same four core courses required of the other MA students in Higher Education Administration. In addition to the four core courses, students must complete six credit hours of clinical applications (internships) in their area of concentration (either collegiate level athletic administration or student affairs administration). The students in College Student Affairs Administration are required to take two courses in student development theory (BCE 519 Student Personnel Work I and BCE 520 Student Personnel Work II), and College Sports Administration students are required to take two courses outside the Higher Education Administration Program (such as marketing, accounting, or management). Both sets of students are required to take six hours of electives from the Higher Education Administration Program offerings. Additionally, these students are required to take one course in Educational Foundations and one course in Educational Research.

2. Doctor of Education program consists of 66 credit hours beyond a master's degree, and follows the traditional format of the College of Education. The EdD program is designed to be practitioner oriented, focused primarily on serving part-time students who attend classes during the evening or on weekends. Students are required to take twelve credit hours of Educational

Foundations, choosing from a wide menu of course work offered by that program, and twelve credit hours from those offered by the Educational Research Program. Of the course work required in Educational Foundations, at least one course must represent a behavioralistic foundation, and one course must represent a humanistic foundation. This requirement maintains the consistency of all Professional Studies doctoral degree programs. Of the Educational Research courses, at least one class must be a research methods course and at least one class must be a statistics course.

In addition to these 24 credit hours, 18 hours of course work must be completed in Higher Education Administration and six hours of course work must be completed in Educational Leadership. The 18 credit hours of Higher Education Administration course work includes Professional Seminar in Higher Education; Power Politics, and Change in Higher Education Systems; and Academic Cultures and Learning in Academe. Course work on Academic Program Development and Evaluation, Institutional Research and Assessment, and Personnel and Human Resource Development are all strongly recommended for the doctoral student with an existing base of knowledge in the field of Higher Education.

Future of the Program

The Higher Education Administration Program has begun a major change, shifting from a doctoral-centered program to a masters-centered program. Due to the ability to advise and work with larger numbers of masters-level students, professional

need, and University-wide collaboration, the Program faculty and administration have made a conscientious decision to focus primary attention on the Master of Arts program, allowing for concentrations in College Student Affairs Administration and College Sports Administration. As such, the credit hour production for the program will begin to reflect this change in the 1997-1998 academic year, ideally providing a two-to-one ratio of masters students to doctoral students.

In 1990, the Higher Education Administration Program was heavily committed to state service through outreach centers in Dothan and Gadsden, Alabama. The difficulty of operating these centers proved to be in doctoral dissertation advising, particularly in providing the advising necessary for student completion and research success. Additionally, changes to the program to reflect consistency in course numbering for masters level course work (500 range) and doctoral level course work (600 range) added to the restructuring of the Program in 1995 and 1996. The result was a re-emphasis on providing instruction to the masters level program, with a more defined and purposive doctoral program. The success of this effort is evidenced by the increase of Master of Arts students to over 30 (from under 20 in 1994), and the reduction of doctoral level students to approximately 50 (from over 100 in 1994). The anticipated result is a better quality experience for both masters level students and doctoral level students, with clearly defined outcomes for each program. The anticipated program combination of students is

50 (combination of part- and full-time) Master of Arts students and 30 (part-time) Doctor of Education students.

The rationale for the reduction of doctoral students was two-fold. First, the doctoral program will be limited in that all course work will be offered on campus, thus restricting accessibility for some students. Second, the ratio of doctoral students to faculty will be approximately 10 students for each faculty member. With the intention of serving primarily part-time students, the ratio will resemble something closer to five doctoral students for each faculty member (at one time), consistent with recommendations of accrediting bodies in other areas which suggest advising no more than five or six dissertations at one time.

Research Methods

The survey for the current assessment of student satisfaction with advising was an adaptation of the student satisfaction survey utilized by the School of Education at the University of Arkansas-Monticello. The survey contained three demographic questions related to level of study, gender, and enrollment status (part- or full-time), and 12 items related to the relationship between faculty and students in the advising process. As no previous effort has been undertaken, the survey was considered largely exploratory, and the administration of the instrument was conducted as part of the larger Program self-study.

The instrument was administered to students through their advising packets in the spring, summer, and fall semesters of 1996. Students were given one opportunity to participate, and once their participation had been noted, they were not given a second survey instrument. As a precaution to data generalizability, part-time students who registered from off-campus locations may not have participated in the study, as automated enrollment systems did not consistently require an advisors' signature on registration materials. Additionally, the telephone registration system in place for the 1995-1996 academic year was new, and as a result, many students may have chosen to not pre-register, waiting until the first week of class to complete registration materials.

Results

A total of 16 Master of Arts (MA) degree seeking students and 40 Doctor of Education (EdD) degree seeking students completed and returned survey instruments. Of the MA students, 11 were female and 14 students were studying on a part-time basis. Of the EdD students, 34 were studying on a part-time basis, and 29 were female.

Master of Arts Degree Students: MA level students were generally satisfied with the availability of their advisors during the period of study, and reported that they benefitted from their advisor in both scholastic and professional areas (see Table 1). These students also reported that they were generally not prepared for their advising session, were closer to

agreement than disagreement in feeling they needed more time in advising, and had neither strong feelings in favor of or against the concept of group advising.

Doctoral Degree Students: The doctoral students responding to the questionnaire agreed with survey items related to knowledge of requirements, advisor knowledge of College and University requirements, advisor assistance in career guidance, and availability at times other than registration (see Table 2). Conversely, these students had moderate levels of agreement with the survey items of advisors taking an appropriate amount of time for scheduling courses and the desire for group advising sessions.

Discussion

The current survey was of the most use to the faculty and staff responsible for the Higher Education Administration Program at The University of Alabama, but the findings did suggest some trends for further examination among graduate students studying higher education. First, students found faculty to be available for consultation and advising, a consideration of greater importance considering the agreement levels demonstrated on the use of the faculty advisor in making career decisions.

Second, as might have been expected, students were at least partially prepared for their advising sessions, identifying required and elective courses based perhaps on availability and convenience in scheduling. This rating may have also been aided by the personal investment of students in the necessity to plan

their individual programs of study, and the personal and institutional pressures for individual matriculation.

Third, despite Miller and Dirkx's (1995) finding, students were not generally in favor of group advising activities. Responding students, through their ratings, appeared to support and reinforce existing advising activities and efforts. This may have been a result of the possible effectiveness of the Program's registered student organization (Students in the Higher Education Administration Program) which provides informal networking opportunities among students. The finding may also be in part credited to the large number of part-time students who are full-time employees and find additional meeting requirements, despite the possible benefit, difficult to schedule and make time for.

The need for effective academic advising is paramount to the continued growth and success of graduate programs, particularly those in higher education graduate programs which make increasing use of part-time students, often those physically located away from campus. As such, there is a critical need, as identified by The University of Alabama's Higher Education Administration Program, to evaluate the advising process and to identify strategies for enhancing the academic value of individual encounters between faculty and students.

The effectiveness of advising may also be tied to the non-formal constructs of the graduate school experience. In addition to in-class experiences, the environment and non-verbal messages of faculty to students can play an important role in the student's academic, personal, and professional success.

Advising, as one component of the out-of-class experience, can provide an mechanism for detailing the effective hidden curriculum of graduate programs.

The current study, as a case study for one program, does not provide broad generalizable data for all graduate programs, but does initiate an important conversation for program chairs and directors about service to students. Further, more detailed research and constructive dialogue among program directors will help to increase the competitive nature of graduate programs, and increase the academic value of degree offerings.

References

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Table 1

Master of Arts Degree Student Mean Scores

N=16

Survey Item	Mean Score	Range	SD
My advisor is available at times other than registration.	4.8	2	.521
My advisor has been available during the posted office hours.	4.8	2	.730
My advisor has helped me make career decisions.	4.6	3	.830
My advisor is available to see me for scheduling courses.	4.2	3	.862
My advisor is knowledgeable of the general Graduate School requirements.	4.0	3	.938
My advisor is knowledgeable of the College of Education requirements.	4.0	3	.940
My advisor updates course substitutions and transfer credit requests in a timely manner.	4.0	3	.830
I have alternate courses in mind when I meet with my advisor.	4.0	3	.867
I know what courses I need to complete in order to receive my degree.	4.0	2	.800

Table 1, continued

Master of Arts Degree Student Mean Scores

N=16

Survey Item	Mean Score	Range	SD
I would like to have the opportunity to participate in group advising sessions (not to replace individual advising).	3.6	4	1.42
My advisor takes an appropriate amount of time in scheduling my courses.	3.6	4	1.23
I have come to advising sessions prepared.	3.2	4	1.11

Table 2

Doctoral Degree Student Mean Scores

N=40

Survey Item	Mean Score	Range	SD
I know what courses I need to complete in order to receive my degree.	4.8	2	.564
My advisor is available to see me for scheduling courses.	4.6	3	.890
My advisor has helped me make career decisions.	4.6	3	.635
My advisor is knowledgeable of the general Graduate School requirements.	4.4	3	1.10
My advisor has been available during the posted office hours.	4.1	3	.755
My advisor is knowledgeable of the College of Education requirements.	4.0	3	.759
My advisor is available at times other than registration.	4.0	4	.900
I have alternate courses in mind when I meet with my advisor.	4.0	3	1.00
I have come to advising sessions prepared.	3.8	4	1.00
My advisor updates course substitutions and transfer credit requests in a timely manner.	3.6	4	1.00

Table 2, continued

Doctoral Degree Student Mean Scores by Gender

N=40

Survey Item	Mean Score	Range	SD
My advisor takes an appropriate amount of time in scheduling my courses.	3.4	4	1.11
I would like to have the opportunity to participate in group advising sessions (not to replace individual advising).	3.2	4	1.35